An Old Friend
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I landed at Cam Ranh Bay AB (CRAB), VN February 19, 1968 at the early hour of 0600. Having volunteered for the assignment, I had no reason to complain, but sand? All I saw was sand; I thought Vietnam was a tropical area. First time impressions are not always the way things are, as I was to find out as time went on. I learned to like that sand pile, especially after I found out how well it was guarded and how secure it really was. The beach and South China Sea, one couldn't get any better duty than this and still be in a war zone, so I soon settled in for my year visit and got on with my job.

I was a little disappointed in my assignment at first, as I was assigned to the 12th Field Maintenance Squadron, Aero Repair Section. Disappointed because I was hoping to be on the flightline and directly involved with the F-4 Aircrews, where I thought all the action was. Not having that much experience with the F-4, I was anxious to get my hands dirty so to speak, and learn all I could about that beautifully put together and ugly aircraft. I mean that in a good way, so don't be too harsh in judging me yet. Having been a crew chief on the RF-101C in France a couple of years earlier, I considered it a beautifully put together and ugly aircraft also. Both did a “Top Notch” job for our Air Force for many years. Days in Aero Repair were always busy, the days blended from one to another, over and over. Funny how your routine becomes so much the same, day after day and we ended up looking forward to seeing the “Doughnut Ladies” for a change. It was nice to see an American girl, if only for a few minutes a day, who cares if she is riding in the back of a pick-up truck, and just handing out doughnuts and smiles for everyone. What a treat that was and made a difference for every man there.

Both of our hangers were always full, and aircraft spilled outside between them, either waiting for a spot inside or a crew to begin working on them right where they were parked. Battle damage, flight control problems, landing gear problems, you name it, just seemed to repeat itself on a daily basis. Roll one out of the hanger ready to go, another came in to take its place. It seemed like a never ending battle, and boredom or spare time were never an issue. We had more than our crews could handle working twenty four hours a day and the time went fast with that wonderful one day off to enjoy at the beach.

On May 8 1968 I was instructed to pick a crew of men, gather up our tools and all the parts that were needed to repair one of our F-4s that went-in at Chu Lai Marine Base. The F-4C tail number was 64-0799. I was told it needed tires, a radome, flaps and some miscellaneous sheet metal work. We gathered everything we thought was needed and loaded it on one of the base C-47 aircraft and proceeded to Chu Lai. According to my Travel Voucher we departed CRAB at 1015 hours and arrived at Chu Lai at 1500. To the best of my abilities I cannot recall any of the flight, must have been scared out of my wits. Up to this point I had never experienced any combat of any kind and we were headed north to repair an aircraft. You bet I was scared, all we had were M-16’s and we were in an unarmed gooney bird! Upon arrival, I instructed the crew to stand by while we checked out the F-4’s damage, prior to unloading all the items we had brought with us.

After locating the aircraft, I was totally shocked at what I saw; it looked like a scrap heap to me. The only thing that would have made it look worse would have been a fire. The “miscellaneous sheet metal work” was an understatement. I thought there was no way we could repair this mess here. The radome was gone, torn to shreds with strings of fiberglass hanging from it. The radar unit had been sheared off and had rolled under the right wing. The nose gear was mostly gone and you could see into the nose gear well from the radar unit area. The right inboard slat and wing flap had tears in them. The right wing external fuel tank was gone. The left wing external fuel tank had ripped open, the left landing gear doors were badly damaged with the tire blown,
and the brakes were packed full of sand. Both engines looked like they had ingested their fill of sand and dirt. Both canopies were jettisoned from the aircraft, and there was a hole in the right engine intake external skin, with another hole in the aft fuselage over the top of the left engine. There weren’t enough 781 Forms in the aircraft to contain all the write-ups that I could see, just standing there at a distance with my jaw dropped and mouth gaping wide open, before a close inspection. I thought to myself, I certainly hope the aircrew is OK, and at that point I did not know they were both safe and back at CRAB.

Returning to the base shuttle aircraft for all our equipment and crew, I informed them there was no way we could do anything for this one. Funny, there didn't seem to be any disappointment among the crew. After having a look at Chu Lai itself, they were pretty happy with my decision to send them back to CRAB, a Home Sweet Home in comparison. I selected two of my crew to remain with me at the damaged aircraft until we had a decision from home base, and sent the plane and all the maintenance people back and waited, thinking to myself that this was going to be a boring wait and what the hell are we going to do?

It wasn't long and that thought became history. Off to one side of the base was a large mountain and from what I heard from the Marines, “Charlie” liked to use Chu Lai as a target practice area from the mountain. That was pretty obvious, the hanger that I was in and out of talking to maintenance personnel, looked like a salt shaker, and had holes of various sizes everywhere. One of the aircraft revetments had been so hot from a past fire that the steel was drooping toward the ground. There were mortar and rocket scars in many places on the concrete and asphalt ramps. Shortly after seeing all of this, “Charlie” decided to stir things up a bit and add some more scars to the base. Now I am definitely scared and in combat!

I thought I was in pretty good shape and could hold my own when it came to running, being a boy from the hills of West Virginia. After about the third or fourth explosion I had gathered up my flak-jacket, helmet, M-16 and bandoleer of ammo and was high stepping it toward the nearest bunker. I was pickin'em up and puttin'em down as fast as I could. Now, finding hilarity at a moment like this is not easy, but this is what happened. A young Marine passed me on my left like I had stopped, and he was carrying everything a battle ready Marine needed. I couldn't help but start to laugh, as he left me in his dust. I noticed he had painted a 4-6 inch bright yellow stripe down the center of the back of his flak jacket and for some reason that struck my funny bone. By the time I crawled into the bunker, he had already fired up a cigarette and looked like he'd been there the entire time. That’s called experience. Never got a chance to talk to him and explain why I was laughing, as soon as “all clear” sounded he was gone again. Later on that evening more rockets and mortars shells came in and several of our Marines were not so lucky this time. “Charlie” hit a couple of their barracks with accuracy. My first time in an attack and in my mind, I did not like this killing stuff. My stay there was not at all pleasurable or an enjoyable and I still consider myself one of the lucky people and think about those Marines often. After turning the aircraft over to a RAM team (depot level maintenance), we vacated Chu Lai on May 11th and I had since totally forgot about 64-0799.

After that episode, the remainder of my tour at CRAB was “a piece of cake”. My next stateside assignment was Shaw AFB, SC. My luck really held out there, they put me in Crash Recovery and Aero Repair, just lovely I thought. It was nice to work at a much slower pace and I gained a lot of experience that I would have never achieved otherwise. I worked on RF-4's, RF-101'S, B-57's, B-66's, and numerous others that came in thru Transient Alert. On Feb 26th 1969, the squadron Commander called me into his office to talk about a TWX he had received from Vietnam and believe it or not the subject was F-4 64-0799. It came from the 12TFW CRAB inquiring about the condition of the crashed F-4 at the time I had left it at Chu Lai! I was directed to the Staff Judge Advocate General’s office to make a sworn statement about its condition and all of its 780 equipment. We sent the statement to the attention of Lt. Col. John J. Apple at CRAB explaining that I had photographs of the damaged aircraft if he required further proof of its condition. My guess is that the Marines used it as a “parts
supply” after we departed. I never did receive a request for photos and no further action was taken. Again 64-0799 went away from my thoughts and memory bank. After a few years at Shaw, I did a follow-on tour at Bien Hoa RVN in 1972. The F-4 program continued with an assignment to Luke AFB, AZ on the flightline with the 58th OMS, retiring in July 1975.

Fast forward to 2005. With our grand-daughter growing up in our home and me with a lot of military memorabilia in my home office, she became curious and inquisitive about all of it. Being anxious to share it all with her, I started gathering up papers from all over our house, boxes, brief cases, folders you name it. I thought if she is really interested I will make up some books with all my papers and pictures for her to pass on after I'm gone. One thing led to another and before long I had my history from 1955 thru 1975 in one binder. In two other binders I started compiling everything from my two tours in Vietnam. Voi La, up comes the memory of 64-0799!

I began to research the Internet like I knew what I was doing. Again I found 64-0799 and discovered it was never repaired or flown again after my abandonment at Chu Lai in 1968. It is now located at the Peterson AFB Museum in Colorado Springs, Co. They have painted it a sissy grey color and changed the tail number to 64-7589. What a way for a “wounded warrior” to live out its remaining days, misidentified by the Air Force Museum organization with no mention of its real past. It served an admirable stint standing proud at the Air Force Academy from May 29, 1970 thru Feb. 24 1987, painted in the fighting colors of Vietnam. After that it was towed 18 miles from the Academy to the Peterson Museum where it continues to serve as a remainder of our time.

In May 2011, I attended a reunion in Colorado Springs, Co. Knowing I was so close to “An Old Friend” 64-0799, I felt compelled to get reacquainted with an urge to see and touch it once again after all these years. 43 years to be exact, almost to the day. Yes, there was a lump in my throat. Yes, the hair stood up on the back of my neck. Yes, I trembled a little when I finally reached out and touched the places I hadn't touched in all those years. Yes, the memories of those days at Chu Lai were very vivid and again thought of our Marines that were lost that day. I crawled all around her, all up in the wheel wells, around the tires, brakes and landing gears. I touched all the spots that were now filled with Bondo. I got reacquainted with AN OLD FRIEND.